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General Debate 3 (a): Actions for the further implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development at the global, regional and national levels

3 (b): Sustainable cities, human mobility and international migration

Statement submitted by C-Fam, Inc., a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council[2]

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[1] E/CN.9/2018/1.
[2] The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

The consequences of urbanization and migration, including the immense disparities in the quality of life enjoyed by rural and urban communities of the world, are great challenges for the international community. Large population movements within and across countries and an increasing concentration of individuals in urban areas are larger in scale and greater in frequency.

In light of the specific focus of our organization, we would like to underline how the creation of truly sustainable cities and of unbiased forms of mobility and migration can take place exclusively when the fundamental right to life of every human being, and the rights of the family are fully respected.

Human life is the greatest resource, and the most precious asset for the realization and progress of a healthy and prosperous society. Under oppressive regimes women are can be subjected to forced abortion and sterilization.

But even when women are not victims of forced abortions and sterilizations, they may nonetheless, be coerced and pressured to consider maternity and pregnancy as burdens, limiting the number of children they will bring to this world. Unfortunately, the latter kind of pressure is a reality also in modern urban centres.

Too often, a woman's right to choose means she can only choose against life. Only rarely is "sexual and reproductive health" used to refer to increased investments in maternal and child healthcare. In fact, increasingly, international agencies and philanthropists suggest that maternal and child healthcare inequalities can be resolved by providing women with more contraception and abortion. They might say that the use of contraceptive methods and aborting unwanted children will improve maternal health outcomes.

While urban areas are wealthier and afford more employment opportunities for women and young people, they are often not equally rich with child-care facilities. Cities offer better infrastructure, and increased opportunities for education, healthcare access, and housing. But they are not often friendly to the family.

It is increasingly difficult for women living in urban areas to exercise their fundamental right to be mothers as this may mean losing job and career opportunities. Societal pressure and norms do not adequately compensate or value maternity and paternity. In big cities, long working days, high levels of competition, and wages are based on the work performed of an individual, without consideration for the person's needs to support a family, lead people to postpone or to renounce their family projects altogether.

Creating family-friendly cities that welcome children must be a priority of governments who wish for their cities to be sustainable and their societies to thrive. Currently, the opposite is more often the case. Living and working conditions in cities might contribute to families being torn apart and they make it harder for young people to form their own families.

The most urbanized and developed areas of the world might be facing a "demographic winter" with difficult economic and societal consequences. The ageing of populations is affecting all parts of the world. Older persons living in cities often lack family support, in part due to the absence of young people. Governments must ensure cities respond to the needs of older persons, but also and most importantly, to enact real and comprehensive pro-life measures.

States should also address the multidimensional difficulties mothers and fathers face in modern cities, enabling them to provide for their children's health, education and wellbeing.

Above all, sustainable cities cannot leave the family behind.

Policymakers should ensure that the ongoing process of urbanization respects the rights of the family, as they are recognized and protected by international law. The family is defined in international law and policy as "the natural and fundamental group unit of society." As such, it is "entitled to protection by society and the State" and is a proper subject of human rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and binding international instruments reserve singular protections for the family, formed by a man and woman exercising their fundamental right to marry and create a family, in recognition of the family's irreplaceable role as "natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children."

While the framers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Bill of Rights may not have intended these formulations as a formal definition of the family, they must be understood as a functional definition of the family nonetheless, and one that has not been displaced by any new international law.

International law has long recognized the principle of family reunification, and the collateral duty of states to make reunification possible to the widest possible extent.

In 1996, Member States established, as a principle of future social development, to "recognize the family as the basic unit of society, and acknowledge that it plays a key role in social development and as such should be strengthened, with attention to the rights, capabilities and responsibilities of its members".

The Habitat II agreement committed the international community to the principle that "human settlements planning should take into account the constructive role of the family in the design, development and management of such settlements. Society should facilitate, as appropriate, all necessary conditions for its integration, reunification, preservation, improvement, and protection within adequate shelter and with access to basic services and a sustainable livelihood".

The International Conference on Population and Development also made clear that states must "develop policies and laws that better support the family, contribute to its stability", "establish social security measures that address the social, cultural, and economic factors behind the increasing costs of child rearing"; and "promote equality of opportunity for family members, especially the rights of women and children in the family".

Nonetheless, what data reports, and what experience tells us, is that urbanization and migration often lead to the fragmentation of families and society more broadly. Urbanization in particular rarely allows individuals to move with their family. Both, internal mobility towards city centres as well as international migration, too often involve individuals abandoning their spouses, children, parents and siblings. As a result, the natural support family members provide to each other, and to society as a whole is undermined and thwarted. As a further consequence, individuals are poorer, lonelier, and less likely to lead a happy life. Certainly, the best available science validates the focus on the family in international law and commitments. Healthy, stable, and united families are the most important ingredients for a productive and healthy society.

Unfortunately, for many people today human mobility and international migration are synonyms of human trafficking. Moving out of their communities, and leaving their family behind, vulnerable individuals fall often victim of organized criminal groups. They end up being abused, commercialized for sex and labour, and subjected to sexual and other forms of exploitation.

Women and children are particularly threatened and harmed by ever-increasing illegal demands for sex and obscene material, insufficiently condemned by international institutions and others.

In fact, while much is being done at many levels to address human trafficking, some groups suggest that prostitution may be a legitimate source of income, and a legal and chosen profession.

Governments must have laws and policies in place to combat the exploitation of women in legal and illegal migration channels and eliminate the perverse demand that leads to the exploitation of women. These forms of sexual exploitation must be illegal everywhere. It is nothing short of a modern-day form of slavery, and a violation of human rights.

We urge the international community to ensure the protection of any individual who moves away or is forced to move away from their community and family from the "sex-industry" and other forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.